

CHAPTER 6

Creative Synthesis: An Approach to a Neglected Dimension of Small Group Communication

I

Creativity is traditionally equated with the talent that guides a writer, a painter, a dancer, or any other artist in carrying out his/her work. This secret ingredient seems to entitle artists to special treatment. Their individualism is nurtured. People often smile at behavioral eccentricities of artists which would raise eyebrows if performed by other professionals. Artists, for example, are indulged, far more than ministers or teachers might be, when they choose to act or dress in an unorthodox way. This freedom from conformity hints at some common assumptions about the creative person.

One assumption is that the artist is autonomous. The praise, "He or she is a nice person," adds less to the evaluation of a painting than it would to judging the work of a minister or teacher. In fact, rudeness or intolerance in an artist is accepted, even vicariously enjoyed, perhaps because, in essence, his/her real work is done alone. Even if the artist is a theatrical director or choreographer, his or her concept and will can dominate; he or she may not have to adapt an interpersonal style to the needs of subordinates.

Also supporting the communication frailties of a creative artist is the assumption that he or she must feel free of all constraints which might inhibit the creative process. It is well understood that creativity demands unhampered manipulation of ideas and materials. This license often is extended to dealings with people.

During the most recent half of the twentieth century, however, much attention has been given to the role of creativity outside the arts. The creation of new ideas and products is now viewed as vital for many aspects of personal and social growth. Change or freshness of experience is a need most people seem to experience with ever greater urgency. Individuals seek

various to their activities, apparel, home decor, in every aspect of their environment. Families need diversity in shared experiences to maintain their desire for cohesion. Organizations require fresh approaches for adapting to challenges presented by changing internal and external conditions. Societies must respond imaginatively to the ever-evolving demands of their citizens. Ability in creative endeavors has clearly become a desirable asset for people in every domain of life.

In nonartistic areas, however, interpersonal coordination becomes more essential. The creativity demanded from committees, within families, among groups of friends and colleagues must be a collaborative effort. In these cases, an egocentric genius can hinder the process of group creativity as much as he or she can contribute to it.

Consequently, also in recent years, the role of group process has emerged as increasingly significant. The nuclear family, the modern organization, innovative teaching methods, all call for ever greater facility at group interaction. Indeed, a discipline of small group communication has been developed to meet this need.

Most of the work done in this discipline, however, is focused on two kinds of group tasks: problem-solving and personal growth. Literally thousands of studies and dozens of textbooks have been devoted to the procedures required for a group to arrive at an optimal or correct solution to a problem. Within the past decade an unprecedented series of articles, books, and workshops has been concerned with transactions that lead to actualizing human potential for intra- and interpersonal authenticity. At the University of Kansas, for example, a student can study in depth the dynamics of problem-solving groups and human relations groups. No course, however, is aimed at the dynamics of creativity in groups. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest a first step for incorporating this area into a course studying group communication.

II

Two areas must be addressed when examining creativity in groups: the goal of the creative act, or *what* is produced; and the process of "creative synthesis," or *how* the group works together to achieve its goal.

It may be said that there are two basic genres of creative products. One is *expressive* and the other is *problem-oriented*. They are distinguished chiefly by the criteria used for judging them. Expressive works are first evaluated by the degree of internal satisfaction experienced by those who produce them (unless the standards of a contest judge or a critic are being considered). Conversely problem-oriented creative achievements are successful when an externally based function is met.

Planning the decoration of a room or the creation of a dramatic improvisation are examples of expressive creativity. When the family feels that a room reflects how they wish their home to be seen, or when the cast feels that the improvised scene expresses their view of the situation to be depicted, it is successful. In both cases, the locus of evaluation is primarily internal.

Examples of problem-oriented creativity include designing a political poster and illustrating a book. In the first instance, the success of the venture is based on how many people vote for the candidate, and in the second how well the ideas in the book are complemented. These standards are external in origin.

Of course, the two domains are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in many ways. The same second means of evaluating creative output, however, are distinct, and this distinction suggests a different approach to the creative process. Training in group creativity should incorporate but differentiate both kinds of activities.

The process of creative synthesis may also be divided into two general categories, again depending on how it is to be judged. When people work together on a joint creative project, the effectiveness of their interaction may be evaluated by two criteria. The first is the *satisfaction* of the participants with what occurred during their collaboration. Few activities hook one's pride, or ego, and can leave one as exhilarated or deflated as a creative experience. When all members participate and feel that their contributions have been respected, the group can emerge from the experience feeling euphoric. When individuals clash without resolving their differences, feelings are hurt, often deeply. The continuing viability of a creativity group, therefore, is dependent upon the level of satisfaction participants report during and after the period of joint effort.

The second criterion for evaluating creative synthesis is the *quality* of the creative product. Ideas may be brought into harmonious unity, but if an extraordinary amount of time is taken to do so, or the group product is inferior to what any one individual could produce, then this criterion is not met. At times the group's struggle to reach consensus is so arduous and time-consuming that the issues are resolved only by reducing the product to the lowest common denominator, one that will neither offend, nor fully please anyone. When the participants' talents are combined effectively into a product that is beyond the capacity of any individual member, then true creative synthesis has been achieved.

In brief, a group process, in either expressive or problem-oriented creative tasks, that enhances member satisfaction and product quality is the aim of our study.

III

With this broad outline of one aspect of the group communication curriculum in mind, we can explore the development of creative ability and the best method of nurturing this learning in the classroom. Certain conditions in the practice of group creativity seem to mandate specific procedures in instruction.

When someone sits down to write an essay he/she usually can determine the time, place, and pace of the work. If one is uncertain about a specific procedure, one can stop, consult a reference work, and then proceed in whatever fashion is most comfortable. When a group meets to

collaborate, however, its flexibility is severely limited. The circumstances and time of the meeting are vulnerable to the constraints of each participant's schedule. When an idea is thrown out, it usually must be responded to spontaneously, without the opportunity to rely on notes or other external sources of information. Thus, the knowledge or skills to be applied in this context must be learned deeply; they must be thoroughly internalized in order to be brought to bear at the instant they are needed. It is inappropriate, therefore, to expect students to learn what is required for effective group creativity by passively reading a book or hearing a lecture. The aims of this learning must be pursued actively, by genuine involvement in the process studied. Consequently, the first principle of instruction in group creativity is that it be *experiential*.

Yet, simply doing is not sufficient. When a group is actively engaging in creative synthesis its focus of attention is the project on which it is working. The dynamics of what transpires between members usually is ignored, even when productivity has broken down and interpersonal conflicts surface. If the group is unsuccessful, members usually blame their failure on the nature of their task, the personalities of the people, the condition of their tools, or anything else that is handy. Rarely can they pinpoint the interpersonal transactions that triggered or multiplied their difficulties. The second principle of instruction, therefore, is to provide a vehicle and an opportunity to *reexamine what transpired* in the group process that affected its success.

Every experience in group creativity involves a mixture of a great many variables. The size of the group, the personalities of its members, the nature of its task, the time available, the materials and countless other facets of the situation interact to make each instance virtually unique. Although a great many hypotheses have been posed about the creative process and much research has been conducted to test them, little that is definitive has been found. Many general guidelines exist which, if appropriately employed, can aid a participant to enhance the effectiveness of a group's creative effort. These should not be learned as rules. Instead, each is best examined for relevance to a specific group context in which a student may be involved. One can then determine their degree of usefulness and gain a feel for how such guidelines might be applied.

These suggestions point to a pedagogical approach involving a variety of creative tasks to be performed in groups, followed by reexamination of what occurred in the light of one or more hypotheses about the process. If the notion under consideration seems to apply fruitfully to the experience being examined, it can then be kept in mind during subsequent creative encounters for continuing consideration and refinement.

In summary, the instructional procedure advocated here for developing insight into the dynamics of creative synthesis is a highly experiential one in which a series of varied creative tasks is undertaken by small groups of students, each to be followed by a period of discussion. Each discussion session should, in turn, focus on a different dimension of the group interaction.

IV

In order to design a plan for a series of lessons in accordance with this experiential approach, we need to further specify the creative tasks and interaction hypotheses to be employed. Both areas may be divided in many ways. I have found the divisions sketched in this section to be useful.

As stated earlier, *creative tasks* may be divided into those with expressive and those with problem-oriented goals. One might further divide expressive tasks into *verbal* and *nonverbal* categories. Verbal tasks, involving language, include writing a poem or a song, writing a story, a fable, a slogan, or a caption, acting improvisations, and impromptu speeches. Nonverbal tasks include drawing a picture, creating a collage or a structure, pantomime, movement, etc. Many other activities, of course, could be added to these lists.

Problem-oriented creative tasks include finding new uses for everyday objects, adapting to unusual circumstances, prophesying the future, reorganizing old structures, considering the consequences of an unexpected occurrence, suggesting improvements for existing creations, etc.

These divisions might be clarified by viewing them on a small matrix. Most creative tasks may be viewed as predominantly either expressive or problem-oriented and as either verbal or nonverbal.

	VERBAL	NONVERBAL
EXPRESSIVE	1	2
PROBLEM-ORIENTED	3	4

Examples of activities which fit in each of the numbered boxes might be: 1) a short story, 2) a drawing, 3) creating advertising slogans for a product, 4) playing charades.

Besides including experience in these four categories, decisions regarding tasks to use for classroom learning need to be made on several other bases as well. First, tasks should approximate as closely as possible creative activities in which students might be engaged *outside* of school or in their future professions. Many available creative games just don't seem real to students. This is a hard criterion to meet, but a significant one to work toward.

In addition, the task should involve *group pooling* of resources, ideas, or skills. Having each person in a group make a separate drawing encourages individual creativity, but does not prepare them for a situation, for example, in which a committee must agree on a symbol or poster to represent its organization. On the other hand, asking the group to create a single drawing incorporates the challenges of creative synthesis more fully.

An effective learning task should also allow group members' *communication styles* to emerge. While task descriptions should include some structure, enough leeway must be allowed for leaders, decisions, conflicts, feelings, etc., to surface in the group. These are elements that influence group effectiveness, elements that must be examined, and that are the focus of learning to be gained from the group communication course.

Finally, it would be best if each task could be completed, for the most part, in no more than fifteen minutes. This *brief time limit* allows for a follow-up discussion that can retrace all the steps taken by the group in working on a task. Sometimes the initial approach to attacking the creative problem determines the quality of all subsequent work. If too much time goes by before the process is reexamined, recall may be dim. In addition, brief tasks allow time for many work-discussion cycles in the class periods allotted to this unit of study.

Another dimension to consider in planning group creativity tasks is *sequence*. Since this can be a new way of working together for many students, the first activities they are asked to do should be relatively *easy and clear*, with more challenges being added as the series progresses. Earlier activities should also be a bit more *structured* with smaller, more explicit steps than those that follow. Finally, the sequence of tasks should move from less to more *self-expression*. Students generally find greater satisfaction from increasing personal investment and exposure in a group, although they may hesitate at first. Therefore, just as they are reluctant to relate their creative work to themselves in the beginning, they will be equally reluctant to return to more objective, less self-expressive tasks after they have dropped their inhibitions regarding personal involvement.

The two criteria suggested for successful *creative synthesis* were group satisfaction and product quality. These may be influenced by many factors in the group's interaction. The literature on group dynamics is a rich source of variables which should be examined for their influence on these goals. Some group phenomena to explore in the light of students' experience with joint creative tasks might be: the degree of each member's participation in the interaction; the amount of influence each exerted on the nature of the final product and how that influence was exerted; the way conflicts were resolved or decisions made along the way; how the overall task was divided among members and the role each played in getting it done; the atmosphere or climate of the group; the subgrouping that might have occurred; feelings that were aroused, the degree to which they were expressed, and how these feelings were handled; the norms of the group, or what was criticized and praised; and responses to evaluative comments.

Any of these suggestions can be the stimulus for a discussion among a group of students who have just completed a creative task together. Here, too, however, some guidelines need to be considered. First, the topics should be *sequenced* from those that are safe or nonthreatening to those that may involve a bit of risk. As trust builds within a group, the threshold of what is comfortable to share lowers to include more, and the issues for discussion should take the group's gradually expanding limits into account. What this usually means in practice is that objective questions about creativity or group process in general should precede discussion of what has occurred in the here and now of the group experience.

Maintaining *consistent group membership* throughout the experiences in the unit permits the development of group rapport which is necessary for productive feedback. In some instances, however, resistant members will attempt to divert the group from serious consideration of discussion

questions. Assistance from the teacher on how to attack and stay with the focal issues usually works to make these discussion sessions worthwhile. If the students you work with cannot identify how group dynamics variables apply to their interaction, a particularly perceptive individual can be designated as an *observer* and be asked to sit outside to watch the group in its creative work, looking for the behaviors to be discussed. The observer's feedback could then kick off the subsequent discussion.

Rather than defining all these briefly phrased categories and concepts at length, it might be more useful to clarify them by developing examples of their use in a unit on creative synthesis.

The approach I have used in the past is to write a sequence of group tasks, alternating creative projects with discussion and feedback sessions. Each task is placed in separate envelopes which are numbered sequentially. The class is divided into groups, usually with about five members in each group. Each group is given a set of envelopes and is instructed to open one at a time following the numbered order, and to carry out the instructions contained therein. The instructions for one sequence of tasks are provided in the next section.

V

Envelope #1

In each of these envelopes is a task for your group to perform. Some ask you to do a brief creative project. Others suggest a topic to discuss related to how your group worked together. The purpose of undertaking these tasks is to learn how *groups* can most effectively collaborate on creative tasks and to learn more about your *own* feelings and behavior in this context.

The envelopes alternate between the two kinds of tasks. This one has a creative activity, the second has a discussion topic, the third has another creative activity, the fourth a discussion topic, and so on. Creation and discussion call for two different kinds of attitudes and ways of thinking. Please try to do your best on both, and try to make the switch each time as well as you can.

The first activity calls for you to imagine that you have taken on the responsibility of caring for two children, about eight and twelve years of age, in an enclosed room for several hours. This is a demanding challenge, since all you have been given to use in keeping them occupied are a few simple pieces of equipment (which are listed). Your task is to create as many activities as you can for them using *only* these materials.

You will be addressing this problem in two ways. First, spend about ten minutes on your own listing as many possible activities as you can on a sheet of paper. (Ask someone in the group to serve as timekeeper, notifying everyone when the time is up.)

After each of you has developed your own individual lists, rejoin the other members of your group for another ten-minute work session. This time you are to pool your individual lists and try developing new ideas that no one had thought of, but that come to mind as the group tosses around

and builds upon what individuals suggest. As a result, you will also have a group list which combines all proposed and newly developed activities. (You will need to ask another person to serve as group secretary to record ideas as they are suggested.)

Materials available:

- 3 paper clips
- 2 pencils
- 1 paper cup
- 1 wrapped stick of chewing gum
- 1 ten-foot length of rope
- 1 paper bag

Note: These (or other) items can be included right in the envelope to give students concrete objects to manipulate.

Envelope #2

The value of group effort in the process of creative thinking cannot be assumed. Many people believe that they can do this kind of work much more effectively alone. They believe that a group exerts pressure toward conformity that stifles creativity and individual initiative. It can create self-consciousness or competition that is inhibiting. They say, Too many cooks spoil the broth.

On the other hand, creative thinking often involves taking a fresh look at a familiar process, seeing it from a new perspective, breaking out of old patterns of thought. A group of people at times can stimulate one another to think more creatively than each could alone by presenting several approaches which can then be combined in new ways. Individuals can pick up other ideas and take them a step further. This view might be summed up as "the output of a group is better than the sum of its parts."

Keeping these two points of view in mind, decide upon a group answer to the following question:

If you had only one ten-minute period to do another "creativity problem" very much like the one you just did, do you think you would do better if you spent that time working:

() individually

(check one)

() as a group

Explain your answer in writing.

Envelope #3

Please read aloud directions 1-6 before beginning:

1. Distribute one sheet of paper to each person in your group.
2. Each person should write a number on the upper right corner of the paper, using a different number for each person.
3. Each person should begin drawing on the piece of paper whatever or however he or she would like. Continue with this for about a minute — ask one person to be timekeeper.

4. At that point everyone should stop and place his or her paper in the center of the circle.
5. Each person should take from the pile another person's paper and make any contribution to it that he or she would like.
6. After another minute repeat this process, continuing until there have been as many rounds as there are people in the group.
7. After you have completed the small drawings, get a large sheet of paper and spend three minutes with everyone drawing on it simultaneously, *as a group*.

(Note: Included in this envelope should be several sheets of 8½ x 11" blank typing paper for the first part and perhaps some colored pencils or crayons. Have several larger sheets of paper or oak tag handy for #7. These drawings can be hung around the room for students to compare their group's work with that of other groups.)

Envelope #4

There are at least two kinds of creative tasks. One kind is problem-oriented, where you try to meet an external goal (e.g., entertaining two small children), and the other is expressive, where you create what pleases you (e.g., drawing on a blank sheet of paper).

Put the list you made in activity #1 and the pictures you just drew in activity #3 in the center of your group. Recall what you thought, felt, and did during each activity, and list the *differences* each of you and your group experienced between the two.

Envelope #3 provided another kind of contrast between individual creativity (steps #1-6) and group creativity (#7). Discuss any differences you experienced between the two and summarize them in writing.

Envelope #5

Take the pictures out of this envelope and lay them out in the center of your group. Each was cut out of a recent magazine. Select one of the pictures, and as a group write a brief story about what has occurred and/or what will occur among the people in the picture. Don't hesitate to use your imaginations freely with this task. (Note: Any provocative scenes cut from a magazine can be used for this exercise.)

Envelope #6

Distribute a copy of this sheet to everyone in your group.

Each person should read over the questions provided for discussion. Then you should proceed through them, as a group, discussing each in turn. If you wish to deal with any very briefly or to go into any at length, feel free to do so. They are intended to aid you in exploring the influence of one aspect of group dynamics, that of *participation*, on your group's effectiveness. Use any procedure that you think best for achieving this goal.

1. Who are the people who have participated most in these exercises?

2. Who have been the low participators? Do these people feel "in" or "outside" the group?
3. The second creative activity was pictorial or *nonverbal* and this third one was written or *verbal*. How (and why) did the difference between the two media affect any individual's participation?
4. Have there been any shifts in participation (e.g., high participators became quiet, low participators became more active)? If so, why did these changes occur?
5. How have the quieter people in your group been treated? How has their silence been interpreted? As consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fear, etc.?
6. Are there any patterns in who talks to whom? If so, is there an explanation for them?
7. How has each person's level of participation affected the two criteria mentioned earlier: individual *enjoyment* of the group experience and the *quality* of the group's work?
8. Recall your group's answers to the questions just discussed and summarize in writing what you have found about the influence of participation on group creativity. (Each person should do this on individual copies of the sheet.)

Envelope #7

The purpose of this task is to apply your group's ability to inventing a creative activity. This confusing goal is made clearer in the steps outlined:

1. Begin by sharing a little bit of what each has done or felt about creative experiences in the past. Each member of the group should share with the others one *successful* creative experience he or she has had in his or her life, something that was enjoyed and/or well done. This might have been recent or early in childhood. Each person should also share either a time that he or she tried doing something creative that was *not* satisfying or something he or she would like to do, but has never tried.

Remember, some people are able to be quite creative at home, in their work, or in a hobby although they may not recognize this. Creativity is not restricted to the arts — writing, painting, dance, etc. One may also be creative in interpersonal relationships and in many other ways, some of which may not be readily apparent.

Go around your group being sure that each person has a chance to speak. It may be necessary for others to ask searching questions or to "tease out" areas and instances of individual creativity, as well as aspects of creativity about which one is dissatisfied.

2. Next, go around the group again, this time with everyone answering the question: What would you *now* like to do that would be creative and that you would enjoy doing with this group?

After a minute of silence for thinking, each person should offer an opinion of what the group or individuals could do that would be fun and a chance to exercise their creativity.

3. Come to agreement as a group on what you would like to do in the next fifteen minutes, drawing from the suggestions just made. You might agree to take up one person's idea, to combine a few into one project, or to do several brief things. This is your decision to make.
4. The last step is simply to carry out your plan.

Envelope #8

Distribute a copy of this sheet to everyone in your group.

Again, each person should read over the questions for discussion provided. Then, you should proceed through them as a group, discussing each in turn and writing your answer to the last one. If you wish to deal with any very briefly or to go into any at length, feel free to do so. They are intended to aid you in exploring the effect of *influence* or *decision-making* on your group. Use any procedure that you think best for achieving this goal.

1. Which people seem to have the most influence in the group? That is, when they talk others seem to listen and usually go along with them?
2. Have there been any shifts in influence from person to person? What has caused these changes to occur? Has there been rivalry for influence? How have these struggles, if any, been resolved?
- ✓ 3. How have most decisions been made in your group? Has everyone been satisfied with what you've done, or does one person generally impose his or her will on the rest? Does the majority push its approach through over the objections of the others? Have there been attempts to get everyone in on planning each activity? Have any individuals felt they made contributions which were ignored by the others?
4. How have people helped the group along by performing important functions, such as:
 - a. Asking others for suggestions as to the best way to proceed or to tackle a problem?
 - b. Summarizing or tying together several different comments?
 - ✶ c. Keeping the group on target, rather than going off on tangents or jumping around from idea to idea?
 - d. Including others in the discussion by asking for their opinion?
5. How have the influence and decision-making patterns of your group affected the two aspects of a successful group (enjoyment of the experience and quality of the group's work)? Each individual should write an answer to this question on this sheet as a record of what was learned from this discussion period.

Envelope #9

The following is an example of a limited but enjoyable form of creativity, creating new words to a familiar tune. After looking over this example, use whatever method you would like to create one verse to this or any other familiar song on the theme of "being a student today."

THE TEACHER'S LAMENT¹

(to the tune of "Sixteen Tons," a folk song)

Some people say
a teacher's made out of steel
Her mind can think
but her body can't feel
iron and steel and hickory tea
frowns and gripes
from nine to three

I got eighty-four kids
and forty-two seats
Sixty are talking
while twenty-four sleep
I can hardly get 'em all
through the classroom door
And if I don't watch out
they'll give me twenty-four more

You teach six full hours
and what do you get?
Another day older
and deeper in debt
You pay your dues
in this and that
Then for twenty-nine days
your bill-fold's flat

You teach six full hours
to eighty-four brats
And all of them yelling
like dogs and cats
They're cutting on the seats
and writing on the walls
Hugging and kissing
in the upstairs halls

I woke one morning
it was cloudy and cool
I picked up my register
and started for school
I wrote eighty-four names
on the home-room roll
and the principal said
"Well, bless my soul"

The last bell rings
and I start for the door
My head is ringing
And my feet are sore
I taught six full hours
my day is made
But I still have
three hundred papers to grade

You teach six full hours
and what do you get?
Cuts and bruises
and dirt and sweat
I got two black eyes
and can hardly walk
When I turned my back
then came the chalk

You teach six full hours
and what do you get?
Another day older
and deeper in debt
I'll go to St. Peter
but I just can't stay
I gotta come back
to the P.T.A.

Envelope #10

This discussion period is devoted to considering what *norms* exist in your group, i.e., what is accepted, rejected, and avoided.

Once again, distribute copies of these questions and read them over. Then proceed to discuss those that seem most interesting and relevant to your group.

¹ Reprinted with permission from *Songs of Work and Protest* by Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer (New York: Dover Press, 1973).

Unspoken standards or ground rules usually develop in a group and influence what is said and done. These govern what *should* or *should not* occur. Some of these norms help the group and others are hindrances. It can be worthwhile to bring these out into the open. To do so in your group, consider the following questions:

1. Have group members been overly nice or polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily?
2. Do members feel free to question, challenge, or probe others occasionally? Do some people feel puzzled about others' behavior yet hesitate to ask them about it?
3. Are all feelings being experienced also being expressed, e.g., has there been any expressed or withheld anger, irritation, or frustration? any warmth or affection? any enthusiasm or excitement? any boredom? any hurt feelings or sadness? any competitiveness? If so, when expressed how have these been received? Have they been criticized or welcomed, or shades in between? If these feelings have been withheld, what made these individuals repress them?
4. How have the norms or unspoken rules about what is OK and what is not OK affected the two aspects of a successful group (*enjoyment* of the experience and the *quality* of the group's work)? Each individual should write an answer as a record of what was learned from this discussion period.

Envelope #11

This is a simple yet challenging exercise in creativity. Operating as a group, using whatever materials you can come up with from your pockets, bags, books, or anything else you have handy, make a sculpture or a structure which expresses your feelings about the creative process in your group. (This may seem strange at first, but can become fascinating after you get into it.) Take fifteen minutes to complete. At the end of that time someone in your group should be ready to explain what you have created to the rest of the class.

Envelope #12

Distribute a copy of this sheet to each person.

Try to spread out in the center of your group all the work you have done so far in this whole series of group creativity tasks. Look them over and recall what occurred and what you learned from each one.

Then each person should write on the sheet a statement summarizing the overall meaning these activities and discussions have had for him or her. Try to be frank and thorough. Some moments probably have been insightful and fun; others probably were confusing, frustrating, or boring. We can learn from all kinds of experiences; sometimes we get as much from negative ones as from those that are positive. Try to clarify why you reacted as you did in each instance and to make each one into a learning experience

by jotting down an insight into creativity, group interaction, or creative synthesis that emerges as an explanation for what occurred. After these have been completed, go around your group, asking each person to share a part (or all) of what he or she has written. Thus, you will benefit from others' thinking as well as your own.

(NOTE: At the end of each class period, or after the whole sequence of tasks is completed, an opportunity might be provided for reports from each group on what each did and what each learned. This will serve several purposes. It provides clear feedback on how this unit has been perceived. It satisfies each group's curiosity about what has been going on elsewhere in the room. Finally, groups that are operating productively can provide encouragement to others which may be having some difficulty.)

VI

The rationale and procedures described in this chapter have been valuable assets for me in teaching group communication at the high school and college undergraduate level. The specific tasks detailed here are about my fifth revision of this same basic procedure. I am certain this version will not be my last. I expect to continue revising and refining it each time. Nor should this be adopted by any reader without adaptations specific to his or her students and his or her beliefs about teaching.

Hopefully, I have raised some fresh propositions for readers to consider, encouraged them to include an additional tool in their instructional repertoire, and provided an incentive for employing their own creativity in introducing this area of study in their classrooms.

PART FOUR

Reframing Methods

Note

I began this volume by speculating about how my own professors of twenty years ago would view the content of current offerings in interpersonal communication. They would, I assumed, be quite surprised at the new areas being addressed within this discipline. I suspect their eyes would widen still farther at the methods now in use. Then, formal public discussions were the primary classroom activity for units on interpersonal communication. Now, structured exercises of all sorts are being employed to illustrate communication principles that apply to informal everyday interaction.

In fact, this field has helped to pioneer a variety of instructional methodologies that depart dramatically from the norm throughout academia. In most classrooms today, the prevailing mode is still limited to lectures, class-wide discussions, and student reports. A visitor to an interpersonal communication classroom, however, might see chairs drawn into small, animated discussion groups, simulations of organizational life being enacted, competitive games being played, nonverbal messages being exchanged, etc. Indeed, these innovations range so far from the stodgy patterns being continued in other disciplines that in many institutions concerted efforts must be made to explain and justify their academic rationale to dubious colleagues.

The primary stimulus for this experimentation with innovative methodologies may be the fact that few other disciplines are working with material so readily available to classroom manipulation: Every student has a lifetime of experience with interpersonal communication situations which can be recalled for classroom discussion and analysis. Experiences which all students have in common can be generated at the behest of the classroom teacher through structured exercises that involve interaction. Other disciplines must rely on textbooks to confront students with the data to be examined. These two rich sources of sample events allow for many avenues of response as well.

In the following part, three still largely untried approaches to addressing interpersonal communication are proposed. The first, dealing with introspection, suggests a means for analyzing experiences that have already been completed in the lives of students — before they ever entered the classroom. The second, dealing with the encounter group, describes how experiences spontaneously generated within the classroom can be used to heighten students' awareness and competency in developing greater interpersonal intimacy. The last, dealing with dyadic episodes, describes how experiences can be developed that extend classroom learnings to times and places that more closely approximate the arenas in which students actually carry out their interpersonal contacts. In each of these ways the array of choices currently available to the teacher of interpersonal communication is stretched still farther.

CHAPTER 7

Introspection: An Approach to Individualizing Communication Instruction

I

Inherent in the encounter between students and the discipline of communication are several characteristics which imply how it should (and should not) be taught. A student enters a class in interpersonal communication carrying deeply embedded attitudes and habits developed during a lifetime of participation in the process to be studied. In fact, each student has a *unique* life history. No two people grow up under identical conditions. Every individual has contacted a network of significant people who have shaped his or her thinking and behavior when relating to others.

In addition, at the moment of taking the class, each student has specific relationships to which he or she would like to apply what is being learned. To be maximally meaningful, new awarenesses must be transferable to one's current position vis-à-vis family, friends, and others with whom one relates. Similarly, the specific personal and professional future each student foresees can have distinct implications for his or her communication needs.

In sum, all students have different pasts, presents, and anticipated futures which markedly influence how they will perceive and react to their experiences in studying interpersonal communication. Such predispositions place this field of study in sharp contrast to virtually all others in the educational spectrum. Usually, instructors of a foreign language, science, history, mathematics, or literature can assume that students have never been exposed to the ideas they will be presenting, that all students need to learn a common corpus of material, and that they will apply their learnings in a predictable social context.

Teaching in interpersonal communication that attempts to greatly redirect a student's daily used, lifelong patterns, that ignores his or her past and current phenomenal world, that seeks change where no need for it is felt is doomed to failure. Only an intensely *individualized* approach is appropriately suited to this discipline.

The need for individualization may account for the current movement toward using classroom group experiences incorporating individual feedback. Nevertheless, such exercises still leave the student subject to the norms of the classroom peer group or the observation form used. Informal papers encouraging students to react personally to course ideas are a step closer to individuation of learning, although they are usually designed unsystematically and bring scattered, superficial responses. My intent is to propose a more comprehensive approach to bring the reservoir of students' preconceptions to bear on their learning. This approach suggests procedures for including self-awareness or introspective experiences in communication instruction.

II

The literature dealing with interpersonal relations that now accounts for individual differences most thoroughly is in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy. The professional in these fields is expected to consider each client individually, to help him/her explore his or her current life situation, the path that led to it, and how greater satisfaction can be attained in personal relationships. These aims are closely related to the goals of instruction in interpersonal communication. Many theoretical frameworks, each stressing a different perspective of this process, exist to guide counselor-client dialogue. Almost all have some, as yet indefinite, degree of effectiveness. Most counselors now employ a variety of approaches, selecting the one (or more) which seems most suitable in each case.

Recently it has been found that when counselees or students are armed with these techniques themselves, self-directed growth can occur. This process has been particularly effective with applications to human relations training. When given the interventions usually employed in such workshops in packaged form, patients and students have gained as much as others in professionally-led groups.^{1,2} Much the same can be done to individualize instruction in interpersonal communication.

I have employed this approach by accompanying each lecture-discussion unit in my course (on interpersonal communication) with a handout that poses a series of questions designed to encourage student introspection. Students respond *only* to those questions with which they feel comfortable and motivated to answer, thus maximizing personal relevance and minimizing the danger of intruding into vulnerable areas.

One might be concerned that such questions, drawn from the repertoire of highly-trained professionals, might prove too potent or explosive for students to handle on their own. This concern merits consideration and ultimately, since this issue cannot be fully resolved through objective measures, each instructor should use only those he or she feels confident about. Keep in mind that the greatest danger to psychological health comes from pressures unwillingly and inappropriately inflicted on a vulnerable individual. When group pressure and leader influence are not present, when students can choose to deal only with

questions that seem to be of value to them, with which they feel comfortable and motivated to answer, their safety is most effectively assured. Compare such freedom with front-of-the-room exposure demanded of anxious or reticent students in a public speaking class, and the relative danger in this process is extremely low, while the rewards are potentially great.

A paradigm for such a series of questions, each based on a theory of counseling or psychotherapy, appears in section IV. At the beginning of the semester, before considering any of the unit-specific questions, students are asked to take some overall perspectives to enhance the effectiveness of their subsequent introspective explorations. These are summarized in the following section.

III

The student's introspection is pointed in three general directions: toward the past, at the present, and into the future. Each orientation is broadly established by an initial experience which provides a foundation for more specific subsequent examination.

The student gains a perspective of the *past* by drawing a lifeline. One begins simply by drawing a line across a blank page and labeling one end "birth" and the other "now." He or she is then asked to divide the line into segments, cutting the line each time a major period ended or he or she became involved in a new context. For example, each new residence, school, job, or major friendship, each birth, death, or marital change which affected him or her would be entered. Finally, he or she lists the contexts, the people most significant in each setting, the major tasks each involved, and the degree of success or happiness felt in each. This overview of one's life provides a reference which can be consulted when contemplating past influences on current behavior.

Present opportunities and issues are reviewed by drawing a "role-network." This consists of a large circle surrounded by several smaller ones, like a sun circled by planets. The large circle is oneself; the smaller ones are the people with whom one relates most often or who are most important at this time in one's life. The student identifies the role assumed towards each person, and vice versa (e.g., father-son, husband-wife), the major transactions each relationship involves (e.g., socializing, decision-making, personal sharing), the ways in which each relationship currently is satisfying and how each might be improved. This summary of his or her current communication field provides the student with a reference for contemplating how the course material can be applied in his or her life at present.

The *future* anticipated is summarized in a "weekly context" chart which has the headings of a weekly appointment page — the days of the week listed across the top and the periods of the day listed down the left-hand side. The student imagines how time slots will be filled, and down the center lists the contexts and people with whom he or she expects to be interacting during a typical week one month, one year, and five years into the future (e.g.,

teaching a class of high school students, making decisions with a spouse). These future opportunities for communication, along with the dissatisfactions identified in current relationships, provide an individualized set of goals or target situations for future application of the instruction to be received in interpersonal communication.

These personalized overviews of the students' past, present, and future in communication are further detailed and employed regularly throughout the semester as they consider all units in the curriculum and, through introspection, relate them to their own lives.

IV

The entries in this section provide basic models for devising introspective questions to supplement each unit of study in a course in interpersonal communication. The term *process X* is used where the specific topic or unit title would be inserted. Some of the topics to which I have applied these questions in my own teaching include: initiating relationships, group decision-making, conflict resolution, self-disclosure, the helping relationship, informing others, persuading others, group creativity, support and confrontation, leadership and conformity, etc.

The questions here are articulated as succinctly as possible. They are intended to serve as skeletal forms which should then be elaborated or fleshed out in order to best suit the topic and student group for which they are being used.

Each question is introduced with a brief rationale, offered merely as a reminder for those already familiar with that approach, and a reference for further investigation of the theoretical premises for those not familiar with them.

A. Influences of the Past

1. Albert Bandura³ found that children are highly influenced by the adult models to which they have been exposed, particularly their parents. People often unconsciously adopt parental communication styles and carry them into their own adult lives. Consequently, it might prove insightful to ask:

How did your parents or others in your family generally handle *process X*? Can you identify any similarities between their behavior and your own?

2. Freudian therapy⁴ is based on the process of "transference" wherein the therapist is treated as a parent figure or someone else with whom the patient has an unresolved relationship. An individual's reactions to others is often influenced by their resemblance to people encountered earlier in life. It can be insightful, therefore, to ask:

Examine your role network and identify the people with whom you have difficulty when dealing with *process X*. Do any of them

remind you of someone with whom you shared a similar experience earlier in your life? If so, how are the relationships similar, and how are they different?

3. Phillips⁵ found that college students who were particularly shy or reticent could recall with much more vivid detail embarrassing or ineffectual speaking situations from their early childhood than could more outgoing students. This finding suggests that a striking or traumatic negative experience can influence one's attitude toward similar experiences years later. It might, therefore, be insightful to ask:

Can you recall an experience involving *process X* that was keenly embarrassing or frustrating? What about it made it so? As you think about engaging in *process X*, to what extent do you believe memories of that past experience affect your current attitude toward it?

4. One of the practices in "psychosynthesis" developed by Roberto Assagioli⁶ is the training of will power. A technique that he employs is encouraging vivid, detailed recall of past experiences in which one willfully and successfully completed acts comparable to ones now appearing desirable. To put this practice to use, one might ask the student to:

Identify an experience you have had using *process X* that was particularly satisfying or rewarding to you. Recall what you did to bring it about, being as specific or detailed as possible in delineating the steps you took. List them in chronological order, if you can, and feel no qualms about boasting or affirming proudly your contribution to making that experience a successful one. For example, you might begin each statement with "I _____" and then continue by spelling out one dimension of your positive behavior.

5. There is greater interest now than ever before in teaching communication skills at earlier levels of schooling.⁷ Many students may already have had some formal training in the process to be taught. It might be wise to have them recall this by asking the following question:

Have you ever learned about *process X* in school, read about it in a book, or in any other way had some formal instruction in how to deal with situations like these? If so, what did you learn that sticks in your mind today?

6. Eric Berne⁸ highlighted the lingering role of parental admonitions in determining present-day behavior. He suggested that at times one's interaction is guided by "old tapes" or parents' homilies about "good" behavior or what "should" be done. This postulate suggests the question:

How would your parents have advised you to behave when doing

X? Would their advice be different for dealing with the specific people in your role network? To what extent do you strive to live up to this advice?

7. Carl Jung⁹ subdivided individual responses into the "persona" (the superficial social mask of the individual presented to others in social relationships) and the "ego" (a deeper part of the psyche which is reflective of personal experiences and is partly conscious and partly unconscious). When these two differ a person often experiences disharmony and frustration. Similarly, Andrew Salter¹⁰ believes that people experience difficulty when they inhibit their emotions and greater effectiveness when they express them. One's inhibitions are learned, so he encourages relearning of expressiveness. He rewards feeling talk, physical expression of feelings, and spontaneous action. His "conditioned reflex therapy" is simply reinforcement of spontaneous, emotional responses. This orientation suggests the following line of questioning:

In our desire to get along with others, at times we don't fully reveal or act in accord with what we really think or feel. Can you recall instances, when engaging in *process X*, when your social self or mask differed markedly from your inner or real self? If so, identify the people or conditions at those times which influenced your inhibition. Imagine what might have happened and how you would have felt if you had been more fully open and honest. Consider whether those same influences exist currently. What implications, if any, does this exploration have for your future growth goals?

B. Exploring the Present

1. Carl Rogers¹¹ stresses the value of the counselor's genuine, emphatic, supportive interaction with the client for enhancing self-awareness and feelings of self-worth. Since we are dealing with an individual's solitary introspection, a technique developed by George Kelly¹² called "self-characterization" allows for an imagined helping relationship of the type advocated by Rogers. His approach, adapted a bit for the purpose of communication instruction, calls for the student to:

Write a description of yourself describing what you think, feel, and do during the *process* of *X*, just as if you were the principal character in a play. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knows you very well, who cares about you, who likes and respects you, and who is honest and open about what he or she says. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "He or she is _____." Then review this sketch and underline the statements which are of greatest significance for guiding your future personal growth in this process.

2. The methodologies of meditation¹³ and psychoanalysis¹⁴ encourage unrestricted awareness of whatever comes to mind. Both suggest

that one monitor or register ongoing thoughts for a period of time without judgment. The former advocates that this process be done internally in order to enhance inner peace. The latter employs verbalizing, called "free association," to enhance self-awareness. This process can be done by simply asking the student to:

Begin with the phrase *process X*, and then think aloud on paper, writing whatever comes to mind, trying not to censor anything except to return to this theme when you wander from it. Do this for ten minutes without lifting your pencil from the paper. Then look back over what you have written and underline what seems most significant to you.

3. E. G. Williamson states that the counselor helps "the individual appraise himself in comparison with external requirements, whether they be school, vocational, or societal. Thus we help him to measure himself against the requirements of the external society."¹⁵ Thus, the following question is implied:

Review your current context chart. In which situations do opportunities arise to use *X*? Briefly assess your ability to employ *X* to your own satisfaction in each context. What differences exist between the contexts in which you feel confident and those in which you are less effective?

4. Albert Ellis¹⁶ believes that the counselor must identify the beliefs or generalizations which guide a client's evaluation of his/her experiences. He believes that many people, after engaging in an interpersonal encounter, evaluate the interaction by irrational, impossible standards that balloon feelings of self-denigration. He encourages clients to judge themselves more kindly, more realistically.

By what criterion or standard do you judge whether or not you have done *process X* to your satisfaction? In other words, what would have to happen for an incident in which this process was involved to be successful? What would make you feel it was a failure? We often set unrealistically high standards for ourselves, making frustration likely. Review your evaluation criteria for this possibility, perhaps by considering whether you would want a best friend to live up to them. If they seem too demanding, revise them until they seem within the realm of possibility.

5. Thomas and Biddle¹⁷ stress the influence of one's role vis-à-vis others on how they interact. Each social role comes laden with expectations or norms that make many behaviors within that role relatively predictable. A student's awareness of behavior in regard to a particular communication process might be clarified if he/she examined what his/her and the other's roles are:

Look over your role network and consider how (if at all) the way you deal with *process X* differs with each person. Then consider how your role and those of other people. (e.g., friend, sibling, student) affect your interaction.

6. Recently, much attention has been given to the way our society's racial¹⁸ and sex-role¹⁹ stereotypes shape individual behavior. To explore the possible influence of those forces on your students, it might prove fruitful to ask:

To what extent do you believe that your race or ethnic status (being white, Jewish, Italian, Black, Indian, Puerto Rican, etc.) has influenced how you behave in situations involving *process X*? By examining your role network, do you recall any differences in your interaction when involved with someone of your own racial or ethnic group from what your experience is like with a member of another group? To what extent do you believe your sex has influenced how you behave when involved in *process X* with members of the opposite sex?

7. Joseph Shorr²⁰ encourages his clients' use of imagination for insights into their phenomenological worlds. He uses a technique, called "the most-or-least method," to help them sharpen their awareness of their attitudes and values. Some examples of how it might be adapted are:

What is the worst thing that could happen to you in *process X*?

What is the best thing someone could say about your employment of *process X*?

8. The "sentence completion" method is a widely used and highly regarded projective technique.²¹ It requires response to a line of inquiry that can quickly identify an individual's preconceptions and goals in that area. Some potential applications of this device might be:

If I were asked how to engage in *process X* effectively, I'd answer _____

A question I would like to ask an expert in *process X* is _____

9. Harry Garner²² has developed what he calls "confrontation problem-solving therapy," in which he stridently challenges the existing mental set of a client who is experiencing difficulty with a statement that usually reminds the client of his or her potential for more effective functioning. Then he *always* asks: "What do you think or feel about what I told you?" This encourages reflection in a new, less negative, often productive direction. Students might do the same if asked:

Suppose someone who is wise and caring and who knows you well were to tell you, "You can do *process X*, stop believing that you can't." What would you think or feel about what you were told?

C. Affecting the Future

1. Victor Frankl emphasizes the significance of long-range hope or meaning in enhancing the determination and effectiveness with which one deals with current struggles in life. He stresses that clients clarify what they most want to accomplish, i.e., they identify the tasks that would give meaning and value to their lives. He states that these

"values do not drive a man; they do not *push* him, but rather *pull* him."²³ It might be helpful, therefore, for students to clarify how a process in communication fits into their personal goals by considering:

If, after you die, someone were to write an obituary describing who you were and what you did in the time of your life, and were to describe you as you would like to be, what are some accomplishments that you would want to see included? How, if at all, might increased skill or use of *process X* help you to realize these accomplishments?

2. Counselors who employ behavior modification²⁴ suggest that long-range, vaguely expressed goals can be less effective in achieving change than short-term objectives that can be objectively evaluated. These provide quick and frequent checkpoints and opportunities for reinforcement. Consequently, the student might be asked:

Examine your weekly context chart(s) for the near future and decide upon a time and place when you might employ *process X* in a new or more effective way. Describe in as much detail as you can what you will do, with whom, when, and where. Try also to state what would have to happen for you to consider this action to have been successful.

3. Raths, Harmin, and Simon²⁵ believe that people operate most effectively when they are clear about the values underlying their behavior. One way that they assist value clarification is to ask students to consider the alternatives to their decisions. When individuals have made a choice after freely contemplating all their options, they believe the decision is more likely to be satisfying.

Another step in evaluating your goal(s) is to consider what other choices you could have made. People often make decisions without adequately assessing and choosing among their available options. Try to list some other possible goals that you could have chosen, and rank their desirability along with the choice you have already made. Is your first choice still the preferred one?

4. Karen Horney²⁶ stressed the danger of attempting to live up to too idealized a self-image. She encouraged her clients to realistically face and accept their actual selves before attempting to achieve personal growth. The following activity might prove helpful for students:

Consider whether the goal(s) you have set for yourself are realistically attainable. It can be frustrating to pursue idealistic, but inappropriate, goals. Rate this goal on a scale of one to ten in terms of the likelihood that you will achieve it (one being very unlikely, ten being very likely). If your rating is below seven, perhaps you should rephrase it in a more modest way.

5. Frederick Perls²⁷ stressed that human behavior often follows an internal dialogue between two poles of the self, which he called the

top dog and the underdog. The former advocates an ideal behavior, the latter brings up excuses or reasons for avoiding it. He encouraged his clients to externalize this dialogue, hopefully thereby integrating both parts of themselves and feeling more centered, less conflicted about their experiences.

This process might be encouraged through the suggestion:

If you experience a desire to achieve your goal and some hesitation or resistance to pursuing it, imagine that each impulse has a voice of its own and write a dialogue in which these two parts or voices within you speak to each other, hopefully, until some resolution is reached.

6. In the reality therapy of William Glasser²⁸ clients are expected to identify what they want, to agree to do what is necessary in order to attain their goals, and to responsibly carry out the necessary steps until the job is completed satisfactorily. By encouraging them to take responsibility for themselves and to do so successfully, he is helping them to feel more capable and to bring more of their lives under their own control, thus empowering them to live more effectively. Students can practice this process with this exercise:

Identify the time or date by which you would like to achieve your goal. Also, describe what you will need to do in order to bring it about. Write this up as a contract with yourself, e.g., "By date X, I will ____." Then try to live up to that commitment. (If you do not, it means that you still had unrealistic expectations and may need to write another contract that is more appropriate.)

7. Ayllon and Azrin²⁹ change behavior by using a token economy. This is based on the notion that people do whatever gets them what they want (rewards). A student can set up a personal reward system through introspection.

If you were to carry out this step, what reward(s) would it bring?

In what way might you plan a reward for yourself that would encourage you even more to carry it out?

8. J. L. Moreno³⁰ developed "psychodrama" in which individuals role-play the relationships in which they experience conflict. One technique used is "role reversal," in which the client plays the role of the other person in the relationship. This assists one in seeing the situation from the other's point of view, as well as in being more aware of the thoughts one believes the other has. This process can be approximated by asking the student to carry out the following activity:

Write the dialogue of the situation you would like to change as you suspect it will occur, i.e., use your imagination to predict what will happen and write it out. This script can provide clues as to where you believe problems might arise and, perhaps, ideas about how they might be overcome.

9. Everett Shostrom³¹ believes that the feelings which underlie our

behavior must be brought to the surface and be openly acknowledged. A student might grow in awareness of the unspoken feeling-level beneath much interaction by performing this exercise:

Review the dialogue you wrote earlier and try to guess the feeling each person might be experiencing when speaking (e.g., fear, anger, hurt, joy). Write these emotions in the margin next to the comments. Then consider how the situation might work out if these feelings were openly acknowledged.

V

Responses to these questions can be useful in a variety of ways. For students, they serve to heighten consciousness of the process being studied; they help to explain the sources of everyday behavior and the role each process plays in daily life; they suggest how the process is relevant to the future and how each person can take responsibility for putting into action what is learned in class. The responses would also be of interest to their peers. Students are usually eager to compare their answers with those of others in group discussion. Finally, they can provide the teacher with insights into how the course material relates to the phenomenal world of the students. Although students should have the right to keep their responses private, some voluntary sharing with the teacher can suggest many specific examples and adaptations for use in making lecture material more immediately applicable to the particular student population.

These questions were intended only to provide raw material for further processing through the sensitivities and professional judgment of the communication instructor. Hopefully, they suggest ways to lay the foundation from which students can adapt a uniform text, lecture, or exercise to the contours of their unique existence. The instructor is an individual, too, with a personal history and already developed screening mechanisms which will be involved in selecting the questions that seem most appropriate and valuable for his or her curriculum. My experience makes me confident that such questions serve to markedly increase students' personal involvement and also to increase the rewards they reap from course work in communication.

CHAPTER 8

*The Encounter Group**

Suppose we sliced the tops off all the buildings in the United States and used a helicopter to hover and look down upon them. We would see people seated behind desks and machines in businesses, around kitchen tables and televisions, lying in hospital beds and jail cells, standing in elevators and in supermarket aisles. We would hear countless words of instruction, advice, persuasion, humor, reassurance, an innumerable variety of messages. Across the length and breadth of the land, however, a few hundred scenes similar in both appearance and dialogue would recur in the pattern that is the focus of this chapter.

Our pattern would usually be found in a large institutional cluster of buildings, such as a university, or in an isolated rural retreat, perhaps on the California coast. From high above we would see a dozen or more people in a circle seated at ease in comfortable chairs or sprawled on the floor. This group could be observed continuing for from two to twenty-four hours at a time. Depending on where we chose to descend for a closer examination, we might see homogeneous groups of students, co-workers, or members of the same profession. We might also see groups which seem to be deliberately mixed, including some with white people and members of a minority group, or adults and adolescents, or even a single group that maximized diversity by deliberately intermingling people of various ages, races, sexes, and vocations.

As we hover close enough to see and hear what each person is doing and saying, the special nature of this circle of communicators would be vividly revealed. The faces and bodies of the participants might seem unusually intent on whoever is speaking, and the speaker's feelings might be easily inferred from observation. The urgent tone of the voices would offer a clue to the emotional climate in the group, as would sentences beginning with "I feel . . .," "What's your reaction to . . .?" and "Let's work this through. . . ."

* This chapter was co-authored by H. Keith McConnell, Ph.D. and is printed with permission.

Had we attempted this fantasy trip over Athens 2,500 years ago we might have seen a similar group surrounding Socrates. In Jerusalem over 1,900 years ago such a group might have included early followers of Jesus Christ. During the Middle Ages Benedictine and Trappist monks held group sessions for personal growth. Early in this century, an American physician named Joseph Pratt helped in the cure of tuberculosis patients by assembling them into a modified version of an encounter group.

The emergence of the encounter group as we know it today, however, can be traced to a chance occurrence on the campus of the State Teachers College in New Britain, Connecticut, during the summer of 1946. A group of community leaders was conferring about the implementation of a new Fair Employment Practices Act. Their approach was to discuss their hometown problems in racial discrimination within small groups. Associated with this conference was a team of observers undertaking some research on group dynamics. Their role was to record the interaction within each discussion group. Every evening the observers met to pool their notes on what they had seen. For example, an observer might have noted what the group leader did, who changed the subject, what conflicts occurred, how decisions were made, etc. A few participants began to attend these note-sharing sessions. When the time came for their own group's behavior to be described and analyzed, they became extremely interested and eager to interject comments on how they saw what had occurred. These conversations were lively and felt to be highly profitable. Soon all the participants were attending these sessions and taking part. What had started as brief work meetings often stretched on for hours and became the forerunner of today's encounter group.

The next year this team of researchers, including Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, Kenneth Benne, Leland Bradford and others, founded the National Training Laboratories (NTL) which has since offered hundreds of workshops for people from all fields. The basic core of these workshops is the dialogue about how people are reacting to what actually goes on within the group itself. The immediacy and honesty of a good encounter group was found to be so useful and satisfying that these groups spread rapidly from coast to coast and were incorporated into organizations such as businesses, schools, and mental health facilities.

The most newsworthy medium for the encounter group has come to be the "growth" center whose business it is to conduct encounter groups for the public at large. This phenomenon of organized personal development is of significant proportions. One pioneer in this area, Esalen Institute, reported that in 1976 almost 2,500 persons attended the various workshops and intense group experiences they offered. Similar centers exist in virtually every metropolitan area and major university town in the United States.

The encounter group is but one of several vehicles which have emerged in the recent dramatic upsurge of activity subsumed by the term *humanism*. Those working in this field hope to revitalize concern for humanity, help people to more fully develop their potential, and change the focus of our

society to its most vital part—the human element. In this age of mass technology and dehumanization, the need for a renewed appreciation of the individual has become critical. The humanist believes that there is a process of becoming and developing which is natural yet unique for everyone. The encounter group is a potent means to aid in this process and to help meet this need.

The focus of most formal education is on the cognitive grasp of subject matter. Unfortunately, this attempt to maximize knowledge, to accumulate facts, and to develop our powers of reason and logic has resulted in neglecting a significant portion of our capacity to function meaningfully. Psychologists such as Maslow (1968) have argued that within most individuals there lies an array of talents waiting to be tapped, especially those which depend on spontaneity, emotional expression. The encounter group and other related forms of experiential learning aim to realize human potential more fully.

To help understand what an encounter group is supposed to be, consider the following statement published by Esalen Institute (1972):

The ground rules of encounter are that participants be open and honest in a group setting, that they avoid mere theorizing and instead talk about their feelings and perceptions. There is often an emphasis on eliciting emotions which lead to positive or negative confrontations rather than away from them. The focus of encounter is to explore interpersonal relations.

But why does an open, candid conversation prove so attractive to so many people? Clearly, it must provide an opportunity which does not normally exist in their everyday lives. A cursory review of an individual's growth reveals how such a vacuum forms. Most small children freely express whatever they feel using sounds, words, and their bodies. When children are angry, happy, sad, or hurt their parents know it. Their voices and faces vividly portray their states of mind. Particular feelings, however, upset some parents, and they demand that their children suppress them. Let's take one example. Some parents believe that children should not be assertive or angry. They reprimand a complaining or demanding child with admonitions like "Don't talk back," or "Be respectful," or "If it's not nice, don't say it." That child soon learns not to disagree. Unwelcome thoughts and feelings are suppressed. Soon the child's public personality is limited to agreeable, cordial comments. He or she finds it almost painful to say no, to assert a point of view in opposition to others, or to take a position of leadership. This dimension of his or her potential has been stifled, at least overtly. Despite this restriction, no one can avoid feeling angry, annoyed, or want to assert his or her will over others throughout a lifetime. Usually when these feelings are aroused, they are repressed, at least until they can be held in no longer, when an explosive "get-it-off-my-chest" outburst occurs. In an encounter group the full spectrum of feelings is encouraged and accepted. In this climate one need not repress spontaneous reactions. One can experiment with expressing whatever is felt, with being open and honest. One learns how to deal with others' reactions to these feelings.

Thereby, a new dimension of individual potential is actualized, one is free to be more fully oneself, and the energy wasted on repression can be put into healthier channels. The popularity of encounter groups attests to the widespread need for this comprehensive degree of openness.

How do encounter groups do their work? To explore this question, let us conjure up two very imaginary participants and follow their initial interaction in an encounter group. One, whom we'll call Sandpaper, is an aggressive, impatient businessman. The other, Cotton, is a shy, reticent student. Their entire group of perhaps 12 people and a trainer meets in an informal setting with people sitting in a circle. At the beginning or soon after, there being no agenda imposed by the leader, the group finds it must determine its own direction. Sandpaper takes the lead in proposing an activity: everyone will introduce himself or herself by giving his or her name, life history, profession, etc. Some agree to this direction, others say it's a bad idea, and a few withdraw into passive noninvolvement. Cotton, being somewhat self-conscious, feels anxious about having a turn at being the focus of the group's attention. He sits with arms folded across his chest, looking annoyed. Sandpaper, sensing this resistance, asks him to begin. Cotton retorts, "Formal introductions are stupid!" The leader asks Cotton how he feels about introducing himself. He admits that he is self-conscious. Sandpaper interjects that he had not realized how his approach to opening meetings affected people like Cotton. The leader asks Sandpaper why he suggested giving introductions. After thinking for a minute, Sandpaper becomes aware that he feels uncomfortable with people whose backgrounds are unknown to him. The leader reflects an understanding of this need, yet instead of satisfying it urges Sandpaper to experiment with trying to get to know people without a title or social group affixed to them. In fact, Sandpaper is urged to share his immediate reactions to each group member, and then to check out their accuracy.

Within this brief synopsis of one hypothetical scene from an encounter group some basic procedures are evidenced. These will be explored. The reader might want to refer to the scene to recall each procedure as it is discussed. When Sandpaper took the initiative in the group, he revealed his customary approach to dealing with people — actively organizing their behavior. The others' responses to him provided clues to how they generally interact. Thus, *as people respond in a group they provide data about their typical communication style. These shared experiences can then be discussed among them.* Moreover, when Sandpaper and Cotton expressed the feelings behind their words, deeper insight was gained. The others got to know them as people, and perhaps they themselves grew a bit in self-awareness. In encounter groups people are encouraged to state their feelings explicitly, instead of just acting on them. Thus, instead of being evasive, one might say, "I don't trust you," or instead of shouting, "You're wrong," one might give the feeling behind it as "Your opinion makes me angry." *When feelings are explicit instead of implied, they can be better understood and possible problems can be better worked out.*

As the group reacted to Sandpaper's initiative, it was *discussing its own shared experience* as opposed to giving introductions in which outside events

were to be narrated. In encounter groups, people often ask, "What are your reactions to what we just did?" "What have we been doing together?" "This is how I have been feeling about our conversation," etc. Discussions about childhood influences or disturbing relationships with people not in the group are more appropriate for psychotherapy or counseling groups.

When Cotton withdrew into a closed position it was apparent that he had something on his mind. Sandpaper asked him to express it, to say with words what his body was hinting. In encounter groups people are urged to be *congruent*; the clues offered by their faces, hands, and bodies are picked up and pointed out so that they might feel confident to be fully open, both verbally and physically. In our scene the body expressed the true feeling. At other times only people's words, not their bodies, express their messages. In these cases they might be urged to put their message into a physical form as well. For example, people who care for each other might hug, people who are angry might wrestle. The goal of congruency is to produce clear, unambiguous messages, which often are more satisfying both to senders and to receivers.

When asking Cotton to express how he felt instead of just attacking Sandpaper's suggestion, the trainer wanted him to *own responsibility for his reaction*. To attack is to make the other defensive, thereby encouraging a battle rather than understanding. The statement "I feel hurt," for example, locates that reaction in the speaker, instead of saying, "You insulted me," which is blaming the other person. The former is an example of an individual owning his or her own feeling.

When asking Sandpaper to give his immediate reactions to the people in the group, the trainer was urging him to be *spontaneous*, to reveal to others (and perhaps even to himself) his opinions as he was forming them, instead of waiting until they were firmly fixed. Encounter group participants often are encouraged to talk about what they are experiencing in the *now*, to say what they are thinking or feeling as closely as possible to the moment it comes into awareness, instead of withholding or repressing reactions for fear of what others might think of them. The trainer was also asking Sandpaper to *risk*, to try out an approach to relating to others that was not heretofore part of his communication style. What people hesitate to do is often most valuable for them. It provides a step toward fulfillment of another dimension of their potential.

When Sandpaper shared his anxiety about dealing with people whose backgrounds are unknown to him, the trainer expressed an understanding of that feeling. This is an example of *reflective listening*, another important component of encounter groups. Too often, when people allow themselves to be open and honest about their feelings, they receive responses of criticism, kidding, or advice; or their expression of feeling is ignored. Consequently, they close up again. In encounter groups expressions of feeling ideally are received with complete acceptance and understanding, whether they be warm or hostile, so that the speaker does not regret having shared his or her inner, more vulnerable self. Sufficient time is taken for that feeling to be expressed fully, using verbal or physical means, or both,

until the speaker feels the sense of relief and satisfaction that comes with authentic self-expression. Of course, the effects or consequences of this self-expression on others are treated with the same patience and care.

The leader asked Sandpaper why he suggested that everyone introduce themselves because of a hunch that a personal need lay behind that suggestion. Quite often people report intuitions, suspicions, or vibrations sensed during the course of an encounter group, and they are encouraged to do so. This diagnostic sensitivity can provide valuable clues to what is on others' minds that isn't being expressed clearly. The person who uses this extrasensory awareness becomes alert to indications of the underlying dynamics between people that words cannot express. One's own daydreams or fantasies are also used to provide clues to fuller self-awareness.

Not all proponents of encounter groups advocate the same leadership approach or the same participant behaviors. The primary distinction is probably the degree of leader directiveness. On the one hand, the minimally directive encounter group leader (e.g., Rogers, 1967) develops a supportive climate in which individual participants are cautiously guided towards mutual trust and openness. On the other hand, the more directive encounter group leader (e.g., Schutz, 1972) provides a more structured and confrontive atmosphere in which participants are repeatedly challenged to take charge of their own behavior.

There is a variety of groups which share many of the goals of the traditional encounter group (if an encounter group can be said to be "traditional"). For example, Gestalt-oriented leaders, following the lead of Frederick Perls, stress speaking spontaneously, being aware of and reporting what is occurring at the immediate moment (in the *now*). In Daniel Casriel's groups the expression of feelings is paramount; in fact, participants are urged to scream their feelings until they are fully identified with them and the feelings are completely ventilated. Thomas Gordon works with parents to make them more responsive listeners to their children's feelings. Reality Therapy, developed by William Glasser, reminds participants that they are responsible for their own behavior and the consequences it produces. Bio-Energetic Therapy, developed by Alexander Lowen, emphasizes how the body experiences and expresses emotions and works toward mind-body integration (or congruency). In T(raining)-Groups, the facilitator focuses on the processes by which the group takes action and develops closeness. Marathon group leaders utilize an extended time period to allow the more personal concerns of the members to be brought up and worked through. Finally, Robert Assagioli's Psychosynthesis method stresses awareness of insights available through attentive perception of one's intuitions, fantasies, and daydreams.

Each of these approaches stresses an element which is part of the encounter experience, yet each is unique. Although much of the same authentic, growth-stimulating communication goes on in each, their distinct features are important for they provide a variety of ways to achieve personal growth, each more suited to some individuals than others.

The encounter group is based on the assumption that people working together in relative openness and honesty can influence each other to reach

higher degrees of self-actualization and awareness. Such a function may be termed "therapeutic." In fact, the encounter group is sometimes said to be therapy for the "normal."

People attend encounter groups to learn. They may hope to learn more about themselves, about other people, or about how people relate to one another. The leader believes these goals will be achieved most effectively if the group members communicate openly and honestly. Therefore, behaviors are encouraged which will lead to close, trusting relationships among them. Having seen and tried those behaviors, as well as being aware of their impact, participants can then judge how useful the behaviors would be in their everyday lives. They have gained some new skills which they can apply whenever they believe them to be appropriate for the situations in which they find themselves.

To recapitulate, when faced with a situation in which they or others seem to be feeling something strongly, communicators trained in human relations should be able to shift the conversation so that people are speaking spontaneously, expressing their feelings explicitly, and helping others feel accepted. This will enable participants to be open about their feelings without regret, own responsibility for their feelings, try to be congruent (send both verbal and nonverbal messages which are the same), discuss and examine their shared experience, give each other useful feedback, express and respect their intuitions, and be willing to take the time needed for working the issues through. In a sense, these behaviors are strategies for good encounter groups and, as we've seen, for many other interpersonal situations.

The experience of interacting frankly and forthrightly has some delightful side effects. The first "symptom" is feeling closer, more intimate with others in the group. Friendship is a treasured relationship, largely defined by people feeling free to be most truly themselves with each other. In a group where the full range of feelings is acceptable, one finds oneself talking about responses usually shared only with those closest to one, if at all. Having been open about one's responses to the group, one is filled with the same feeling of close friendliness usually reserved for family and intimate friends.

An attempt to express more about personal feelings than is typically socially acceptable requires a risk. One must be prepared to bear the consequences, to deal with the receiver's reaction, whether hostile, hurt, or embarrassed. This risk causes tension. The body tightens to receive the response. Once that response is found to be bearable and the risk is proved worthwhile, a great feeling of relief sets in. Repressed feelings create physical tensions manifested as headaches, tight muscles, and stomach upset. Expressed feelings allow the body to return to a natural, relaxed state. Side effect two, therefore, is a pleasing degree of physical harmony.

Finally, one feels more confident about facing and coping successfully with the emotion-laden situations in everyday life. Some new and very useful skills for human relations have been learned. The participant can master situations in which he or she had heretofore felt helpless. What

had seemed confusing, formidable, and frustrating before now seems manageable. One's sense of competence increases, creating an enhanced self-image.

All these side effects explain the feeling of being "high" often reported by participants in successful encounter groups. They combine to produce a state of euphoria, of joy. It is an almost child-like feeling, the result of having returned for a time to that state of spontaneous authenticity effortlessly unhampered by the restrictions of social etiquette.

Although the emphasis in this chapter is on the encounter group per se, it is also important to consider other situations which can be affected by the use or nonuse of the group behaviors we've been discussing. For the encounter group to be a relevant learning experience, its essential ingredients must have some application to less artificial, day-to-day realities. Consider, for example, a business setting in which a meeting of several department heads is in progress. For over two hours these individuals have been bogged down in attempts to work out the best solution to the company's current problems. The same facts appear to be available to all, but some participants are unfairly blocking out the others' points of view. If the chairperson of the meeting were aware of these perceptual biases, he or she would have a choice: to continue talking only about the content or topic at hand or to try to deal with some of the underlying feelings of those involved. In effect, the chairperson has a choice similar to that of the encounter group leader. Is it more productive to keep the feeling level submerged, or can something useful be gained by acknowledging and exchanging feelings when they exist and are affecting the ongoing business interaction?

In many cases business meetings bypass the feelings of their members on the grounds that this situation is not the place for feelings — "business shouldn't meddle in this area!" There may be some truth to this fear, for surely I am not suggesting that a business function like an encounter group. Such an extreme would be ludicrous; but let's consider a compromise. Suppose the chairperson had offered the conflicting members the chance to voice their feelings toward each other at that time or perhaps in a private get-together later. It seems likely that such an exchange could shed some light on the reasons behind the disruptive barriers in the meeting so that more productive interactions could be pursued. Thus, as in an encounter group, it may sometimes be of value to examine the effects of unexpressed feelings on the behaviors around us.

Most proponents of encounter groups believe it is important for individuals to explore new behaviors, to take some risks, and thereby broaden their perception of what alternatives are in fact available to them. In a number of educational settings today, the student-teacher relationship has increased in scope and deepened in intensity and interpersonal involvement. One of the reasons for this change is analogous to certain encounter group tactics. One of the problems with traditional models of education was and still is the strict role-casting assigned to the student and to the teacher. The student should listen, follow instructions, answer

questions when asked, do homework, show respect for the teacher, etc.; the teacher should lecture, be all-knowing, give examinations, assign grades, etc. Given these types of behavioral definitions of the student-teacher relationship, a teacher takes a considerable risk in initiating a new pattern of interaction which changes their former roles. Consider, for example, the teacher who decides to introduce student self-evaluations as a part of the grading scheme. Such an individual is giving students more responsibility for their own learning and has thus initiated a new and perhaps more meaningful pattern of teacher-student interaction. The principle is the same as in the encounter group — to grow is to risk, to explore, and to expand individual responsibility.

Business and education can indeed gain by utilizing encounter group ideas. Situations abound in which people need the skills of leading, following, cooperating, and compromising — in essence, the skills of relating with others, of being skilled in interpersonal communications. The formal organization is not the only place however, where encounter group strategies can be of value. The family scene, the group of friends, and even the casual social setting are all potential arenas for personal and interpersonal growth.

All too often the members of a family do not take responsibility for their feelings for one another; instead, they fall back on habitual responses and behaviors. Imagine for example, the college-aged male lecturing a younger brother about the latter's choice of friends: "Quit hanging around with those guys or I'll do something about it; they're a bad bunch and you should stay away from them!" The message is clear. The older brother is threatening and trying to control the behavior of the younger brother. But is that really his message? Are his words consistent with his feelings? Not likely. It's a safe bet that he is actually feeling concern for his brother, a sincere caring for his welfare. Again there exists the encounter group parallel. The opportunity exists for these two brothers to engage in an interaction which deals more explicitly with the heart of the issue. The older brother can perpetuate the game, or he can own up to his feelings and perhaps open new paths of growth between them.

Similarly, the commonplace situation of a group of friends interacting presents the opportunity to broaden their interactions by using some encounter group tactics. How often do friends really talk about what's happening in the present and in the now? Imagine two couples discussing the apparent dishonesty of the men and women in the movie just seen. If, in fact, they are expressing what they are seeking in their own relationship, would it not be of value to speak more directly about it? With a little effort, they, too, might be able to open new doors, to experience the initial discomfort and subsequent growth, which is so often reported in the laboratory situation of the encounter group.

Social situations can also be vehicles for more meaningful human interactions. The casual chitchat of a cocktail party is full of behavioral inconsistencies which may be effectively brought into the open and used to the benefit of all concerned. If an individual is voicing verbal agreement to what is being said while his or her body is simultaneously negating the

opinion, it might be worthwhile to clarify this incongruency, e.g., "I sense by your facial expression that you aren't really as agreeable to the idea as you said you were." Of course you could ignore the inconsistency and continue with what may be a somewhat dishonest interaction. Clearly, in all of the above instances the encounter group option involves some risk to the initiator. The experience of the effects and results will determine how often the risk will be taken in the future.

People from the preceding social categories frequently include the encounter group mode of learning in their formal attempts to acquire certain skills. For example, many business organizations send their managers to human relations training programs which have considerable overlap with the procedures of encounter groups. Each year the NTL Institute conducts numerous such labs, and thousands of individuals go away more attuned to the intricacies of human potential, interpersonal relations, and group dynamics. Clearly, these companies must consider this kind of learning experience to be of value to them. The same is true for other walks of life—the university trying to meet the needs of its students with courses in sensitivity training or encounter, the church program trying to revitalize its congregation, and the married couple or family striving for fuller and more authentic relationships.

But does subsequent change really occur as a result of the encounter group experience? The place to look for an answer to such a question is the research literature in the area of human relations training and small group interaction. Although much research has been done, there is a lack of conclusive evidence based on hard or objective data, due chiefly to the problems inherent in measuring the many dimensions of personal change.

Nevertheless, some conclusions have been drawn about the effects of the human relations group experience. For example, House (1967) studied the outcomes of human relations laboratory training for supervisors, and reported that it may have had the intended effect of inducing more consideration for subordinates, less dependence on others, less demand for subservience from others, and better communication through more adequate and more objective listening. However, he did suggest that such an experience is not likely ideal for all organizations nor for all situations.

Other kinds of effects have been reported. Individuals' self-perceptions can change as a result of such group experiences (Campbell and Dunnette, 1968), and, in some cases, similar changes are reported by participants' friends or co-workers in the back-home situation (Dunnette, 1969). This latter study revealed an increase in the empathic skills of group members. Bunker (1965) also noted some on-the-job changes in performance after an intense group experience. He reported that participants were more open, tolerant, more aware of self and others, and generally more skilled in interpersonal situations.

McConnell (1971) studied two human relations laboratory programs and reported that there were differential effects both in the groups and on some of the self-descriptive measures which were taken. As well as noting the consequences of the labs, e.g., that self-report measures showed the

participants to be more sensitive to feelings, and more authentic in their relationships, he found that the more flexible, tolerant, and independent participants got along better in the groups, suggesting that perhaps the intense group experience may have better results for some people. The extremely closed-minded or defensive person is likely to have a difficult time in an encounter group. It is an irony that individuals who experience the most trouble in such group situations are the very ones who could most benefit by the learning if it occurred. This supports one of the cautions sometimes heard about the encounter group — namely, what's good for some isn't necessarily good for all.

The reader interested in the kinds of precautions to consider in deciding about joining an encounter group might well read an article like Shostrom's "Let the Buyer Beware" (1969). This human potential psychologist makes no bones about the fact that one should show some care before leaping into an unknown commodity. He discusses issues like the legitimacy of the sponsoring organization, the qualifications of the leader, and the motivation of the participant.

Something with as much potential good as the encounter group is also likely to have some potential drawbacks. For example, if a group becomes too self-analytical or picky in analyzing their shared experiences, feelings can be blurted out which put the speaker or receiver into an awkward or embarrassing situation; people can be pressured into believing that only one dimension of feelings such as hostility or love can be acceptably expressed; certain physical expressions of feelings can upset some individuals' existing personal values, etc. Group pressure can be misused.

Once feelings have been dealt with openly and honestly, and participants feel comfortable and close with their groups, the communication experienced together may become increasingly personal. The caring which people feel for each other might lead to sharing their deepest concerns, which could, at times, bring to the surface issues that are beyond the scope of the group to handle.

A critical issue concerning encounter group leaders is the back-home environment of the participants. How is the learning which goes on during the group experience transferable to the individual's everyday life? In some instances, the prevailing norms of behavior at home, at the office, etc., conflict drastically with the behaviors and beliefs of the encounter group. Individuals who undergo a significant growth experience and a marked change in personal style may find themselves in an uncomfortable situation when they try to interact with their everyday associates. Such people must be cautioned that their experience was probably unique and that they must take a step at a time back home. Their friends and associates did not share their experience; therefore, they may have difficulty explaining what they've learned or what they went through. Participants generally find considerable bafflement and some resistance if they take on the role of proselytizer for the "new way" of living. More than once ex-encounter groupers have been rejected by former associates. Here again the leader's role is crucial. The skilled encounter group leader would devote some time to the

problems of reentry and transfer, to sharing the experience with non-participants, and to applying what was learned to new situations.

Thus, the encounter group is basically a laboratory, a setting in which exploration and learning can take place. It is a miniature society in that numerous parallels to the outside world can be seen. Many of the dynamics which occur in the life of an encounter group are the same as those in the development and life of groups, organizations and societies in the real world. The basic ups and downs of the communication process are the same. The difference lies in the nature of the accepted norms of communication. The encounter group broadens the scope of what is communicated and how it is communicated.

CHAPTER 9

Communication Education Through Dyadic Interaction

We try to keep class enrollments low in my department to allow for personal interaction between students and instructors. Recently, budgetary limits have brought about pressure to increase class size. Responding dutifully, I attempted to develop a course in my area of instruction that could handle large numbers of students. My procedure was to offer lectures on each topic in the curriculum, and then to divide the class into groups of five or six for structured opportunities to experience, observe, and share feedback about the processes being examined.

This model is widely used, yet despite many efforts to improve it, my students still grumbled about the "artificiality" of the classroom setting and the structured exercises. They would say, "I can talk so much more freely and genuinely *outside* of class, with *one* other person, but in this group, being told what to do and seeing all the other groups doing the same thing, I feel fake and uncomfortable." Dropping in on each group as an onlooker-consultant, I had to admit that I felt the same way.

Taking my cue from exactly what so many students had said, I replaced some group exercises with one-to-one dyads, to be held after the class, wherever and whenever students preferred (within the week after each lecture session). To evaluate the impact of this change, I solicited students' reactions. (The learning to be gained through interaction was intended to be highly personalized and individualized, suggesting, therefore, a subjective self-report approach to evaluation.) On the instruments I devised, they reported more *enjoyment* and *learning* from the dyads than from other course experiences (lectures, readings, writing papers, and group interaction). Some of the major reasons given for this preference were similar to aspects of dyadic interaction reported in research done on this process. A summary of the results of this informal study follows with citations to related small group literature.

Students reported that the dyads:

1. Seemed more relevant to their daily lives — most of their newly forming significant relationships are also experienced dyadically, e.g., dating and marriage, roommates, job interviews, etc.¹
2. Seemed a more potent, intimate, memorable context for interaction — with only one person reacting to them, students became more open; they experienced more closeness, more investment and energy in their interaction, and more concern for each other.²
3. Provided this kind of contact with fascinating people they would ordinarily never get to know — campus living and social groups are often spread far apart and friendships tend to cluster around those with similar major areas of study and leisure-time interests.³
4. Developed deeper sensitivity to others with these new contacts — the phenomenal words behind people's masks were seen, social stereotypes were shattered, almost always evolving to a more positive view of one's partner.⁴
5. Provoked new insights into self-awareness as well — feedback from a partner was most direct and real, and they found themselves relating in ways they hadn't tried before, thereby seeing untapped potential within themselves worth releasing.⁵
6. Allowed the processes of interaction to emerge more clearly — with only two people interacting, issues, conflicts, decisions couldn't be avoided; attribution of causality for what occurred could be made more clearly.⁶
7. Usually turned out to be far more absorbing and intense than expected — apathy seemed impossible to maintain, the limits of the traditional student dropped away, and interreaction often evolved from a hesitant start to a surprisingly potent contact.⁷

Having tried and evaluated this approach I could not fathom why it hadn't been given more attention in communication education literature.⁸ Other approaches to human growth use this one-to-one mode, e.g., psychotherapy, music lessons, medical treatment, etc. To move from individual speech-making to small group interaction, thereby bypassing dyadic encounters as is the case in most speech programs, is to diminish greatly the potency of instruction in communication. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the framework by which a communication teacher can add this medium to his or her instructional repertoire.

To employ this approach with optimum effectiveness for learning, the instructor must make several key decisions. These include:

1. What tasks are suited for dyadic interaction?
2. How are students and tasks matched?
3. How are students matched with dyad partners?
4. Under what conditions should dyads be held?
5. How are learnings drawn from dyadic experiences?

Each will be examined in turn.

What Tasks Are Suited for Dyadic Interaction?

The tasks which students can undertake in dyads are almost as numerous as those encountered in everyday life. Man is a goal-seeking organism. When two people interact they usually are seeking some kind of control, payoff, or reward.⁹ Often, several objectives are sought simultaneously, although one objective usually influences the encoding and decoding processes predominantly. To achieve that objective successfully, specific strategies or skills have been found to be helpful. A review of the literature reveals that several kinds of objectives and the skills needed to achieve them have been identified. Those appearing most frequently are summarized here.

When two people initiate a relationship, *socializing* skills are used and exploration of multiple interests occurs;¹⁰ when they must make a decision, *problem-solving* skills are needed;¹¹ when creative ideas are sought, *idea-generating* techniques such as brainstorming and synectics can be helpful;¹² when knowledge must be transmitted, *expositional* and *instructional* skills are of value;¹³ when issues are debated, techniques of *persuasion* are employed;¹⁴ when agreement must be reached, methods of *negotiation* and *conflict-resolution* are called upon;¹⁵ when someone is experiencing a personal crisis, *helping* responses are most appropriate;¹⁶ when a personal choice must be made, *value clarification* methods are put into play;¹⁷ when a matching of personnel and position is required, *interviewing* techniques are employed;¹⁸ when personal intimacy or authenticity is sought, *T-group* procedures are put into effect;¹⁹ when one seeks to heighten consciousness of political, ethnic, or sexual influences, *confrontational*, *consciousness-raising* questions in each area are posed.²⁰

Each of these objectives for the communication process has been the focus for a unit of study in a course. Each can be experienced in dyadic interaction.

Several major variables differentiate these areas of communication from one another. Some are inherent within the tasks and others are related to the students' prior experiences. One is the *locus of dialogue*. There are two basic perspectives from this view. In several of the communication processes the locus of dialogue is on *external* tasks, and in others the content deals with *internal* perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and values. Another way of conceptualizing this variable is that in some cases the criteria for judging the success of dialogue come from external sources (e.g., one asks, "Does the solution solve the problem?"); in other cases the judgment comes from internal sources (e.g., one asks, "Does the person experiencing the personal dilemma being discussed feel relieved?").

Another crucial variable is the *role relationship between participants*. Again, a bipolar continuum is helpful in conceiving this dimension. On the one hand, in some dyadic interactions the roles of each person differ or are *imbalanced* (e.g., in an instructional context the teacher has knowledge that the student is seeking). On the other hand, there are instances in which the roles are relatively *equivalent* (e.g., in a marriage context to achieve intimacy, usually the two participants mutually share their perceptions and feelings).

A *comprehensive* program of interpersonal communication, one concerned with including every kind of dyadic experience, would draw from all of the following quadrants:

	<i>Balanced</i>	<i>Imbalanced</i>
External	problem-solving debate creative synthesis	informing or teaching interview sales pitch
Internal	personal intimacy conflict resolution (re: opinions) socializing	helping choice-making consciousness-raising

Comprehensiveness is not the only criterion for selecting dyadic experiences. If time is limited and an individualized approach to learning is valued, the personal relevance of a task to a student may be considered. Although students may be asked to undertake the entire array of dyads, some freedom of choice may be permitted on the basis of the following orientations:

1. Pragmatic approach — the student selects tasks which are used most often now (or will be used in the future), those most useful.
2. Therapeutic approach — the student selects tasks with which he or she has the most difficulty, ones which apply in relationships which he or she wants to improve.
3. Human potential approach — the student selects tasks rarely engaged in, those he or she tends to avoid or believes he or she can't do well.
4. Personal responsibility approach — the student selects tasks which he or she most wants to do, which are believed to be beneficial.

How Are Students and Tasks Matched?

Matching partners for dyadic interaction can greatly influence the value of the experience. In this format, the nature of the person with whom the interaction is shared can shape the experience as deeply as can the nature of the task being undertaken. The choice can be made upon several bases, each of which has some educational value. Several bases for matching students and an approach to employing them are outlined.

We know that people *attracted* to each other can exert more mutual influence than people randomly paired.²¹ Consequently, one way to make the dyad a significant experience is to ask students to select partners themselves.

When people are matched who have *contrasting* ways of relating, they can each have close contact with someone who sees and responds to the world differently than they do. This adds a new perspective to their awareness. Aggressive people can learn how reserved people feel and react, and vice versa.

Matching people with *similar* approaches to communication allows for greater empathy and sharing of comparable perceptions.²² People gain as much from learning that their way of dealing with people is not unique and feeling supported in it as they gain from learning about alternative points of view.

Finally, students often find it valuable to be matched with classmates who share *traits similar to others* with whom they deal outside of school. This mode of pairing provides a laboratory, almost a role-playing, experience for trying new ways of relating or trying fuller honesty in feedback without the risk of damaging relationships in which they are deeply invested.

Since each of the four methods described has its own kind of value, I usually explain the alternatives and the potential usefulness of each to my students and then allow them to select partners who offer the most promise of a rewarding dyad experience.

To facilitate their choice-making each student is asked to write a self-characterization sketch, following a pattern introduced by George Kelly as part of his fixed-role therapy system.²³ Kelly asks his clients to describe themselves as they would a character in a play; writing their sketch as it might be written by a friend who knows them very intimately and sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know them. He stresses use of the third person, to start out by saying, "John Doe is

These sketches are then reproduced, and copies are distributed to all students. The four approaches to pairing are discussed as the bases upon which they are to identify the individuals with whom they might most profitably interact. The sketches are kept anonymous to minimize the influence of extraneous choice factors. Students are asked to select several more people than they actually will be matched with, so that enough pairings can be arranged which seem mutually rewarding. This system for matching dyadic partners has evoked higher satisfaction scores than any of the other approaches I have used over the years.

* The *contrasting* and *similar* methods of matching dyadic partners are each somewhat more appropriate for one of the types of tasks mentioned in the preceding section. Tasks in which the roles are *imbalanced* would be better suited to dyads in which the partners are *similar*, since at least one must take on a role that is atypical, thereby providing a new experience. Tasks in which the roles are *balanced* would be better suited to dyads made up of *contrasting* people, since the task prohibits them from naturally slipping into their typical, perhaps dominant or submissive roles, and again a new experience is more likely.

Under What Conditions Should Dyads Be Held?

Several issues enter into designing the conditions in which the dyadic work takes place. They include the following:

1. *Time.* Students report that the longer the dyad is meaningfully extended the richer a learning experience it is. Perhaps this is because the initial stages of a relationship generally are impersonal. People are sizing one another up, interacting on the basis of broad cultural and social stereotypes.²⁴ Only after this feeling-out phase helps each person become oriented to the other can deeper probes explore each individual and the process of their interaction be undertaken comfortably and honestly. Students usually report that dyads that end within the first hour and a half are least rewarding, those that continue for three hours or more provide the richest learning experiences.
2. *Place.* In order to go beyond what commonly is exchanged in classroom or casual campus interactions, the setting usually must be nonacademic. Students report that their apartments, a park, or a quiet tavern have been most conducive to lengthy intimate dialogue. A time period, such as the evening, with no set deadline is also recommended, so that the dyad can run to its natural end without interruption.
3. *Arrangements.* Establishing the time and place for the dyad seems best done outside of class time by the two people who are to work together. By making contact and deciding when and where to meet independently, they are simulating more closely the process of reaching out to one another that must occur when people decide to pursue a relationship not mandated by course requirements. This step seems to develop a deeper sense of self-directed learning.
4. *Sequence.* Contacting and meeting with a relative stranger for a lengthy, intimate encounter is a risky step to take. Therefore, I allow students to meet with designated partners in whatever order they choose, to maximize their initial sense of safety and their chance of having a gratifying experience. At the beginning of a semester students usually feel some reluctance to try this mode of relating. Although positive experiences are the rule rather than the exception, they often expect the worst and pleasant encounters come as a surprise. Cushioning the first few tries as much as possible helps to build their faith in each other.
5. *Structuring.* The amount of structure needed to make a dyad effective varies with the topic and the students involved. Some people, dealing with some themes, need only the smallest sense of direction to proceed productively. Others will expend their entire time together in aimless small talk which they themselves later see as wasteful, unless they are given a clear plan to follow. Consequently, what has

worked best is suggesting such a plan for each dyadic session with an invitation to change or discard it should that seem worthwhile. It matters very little that a preordained structure be followed, as long as the general theme is considered, the interactions stretch the students' limits, and the process is carefully examined. In fact, the only restriction on their behavior worth enforcing is that their dialogue provide meaningful answers to the feedback questions which have been posed. (These questions are discussed in the last section of this chapter.)

How Are Learnings Drawn from Dyadic Experiences?

The dyad becomes a potent learning experience if either one or both of the following conditions are met: First, it inspires communicative behaviors that are beyond what the participants customarily would employ in their everyday lives (i.e., it expands their concept of what they can *do*). Second, it generates more *awareness* of their communication process and what affects it than each had had before (i.e., they expand the range of what is *conscious*, and hence under their control, when communicating). The dyad should be somewhat structured to maximize these ends.

The first goal can be achieved by designing exercises that force an extended, focused dialogue in an area that is usually dealt with tentatively, briefly, or not at all in casual social discourse. Several examples of "behavior-expanding" dyadic tasks follow.

1. People who wouldn't ordinarily be attracted to each other by propinquity, similarity, etc., and who would ordinarily talk very impersonally can be encouraged to share more of their personal worlds by the following dyadic exercise.

Share with each other your personal points of view on the topics listed. This means in regard to your *own* life, not about the topic in general. You might begin by rating them according to the ease with which you feel ready to discuss them. Put an "E" next to those areas that you would find "easy" to talk about; put an "H" next to those that are "harder" to talk about; and put an "S" next to really "sensitive" areas. Then one person should pick an E area and share how it is dealt with in his or her life. The other person then offers his or her perspective. Next, the second person chooses an E topic and shares his or her view of it, after which the first person responds. Alternate this way until the E's have been exhausted and proceed as far through the H's and the S's as you wish. Neither of you should feel pressured to reveal *anything* you don't want to. Probing questions are OK, but "I'd rather not say any more about that" is always an appropriate answer, too. Of course, you should agree to keep your conversation confidential.

- a) Your religious views and practices
- b) Your political views and practices
- c) Your sexual views and practices
- d) Your drug use and views
- e) Your entertainment preferences
- f) Your past, present, and future work experiences and hopes
- g) Your financial situation
- h) Your relationships with family, friends, etc.
- i) Your image of yourself — positive and negative factors
- j) The past and present condition of your health
- k) Anything else to which you react strongly

2. People who ordinarily are only comfortable when maintaining cordial, pleasant, "nice" relationships, who tend to avoid conflict, can be encouraged to experience their ability to deal with this dimension of human relations by the next dyadic exercise.

Perhaps you are paired with someone whose orientation to many issues is different from yours or from most of your friends. Take advantage of those differences by focusing on them as fully as possible. Discover on what issues you disagree and then discuss them at length. You might identify these by going through a newspaper and stopping at anything about which either of you has an opinion (i.e., a headline, an editorial, an advertisement, a cartoon, etc.). Share your opinions until you clearly understand each other, then move on. Or, you might use the following list of controversial issues as a starting point:

- a) Men's and women's liberation
- b) Race relations
- c) Energy policies
- d) America's Middle East or general foreign policies
- e) Inflation
- f) Environmental protection
- g) Education (at a particular university)
- h) Sorority, fraternity values
- i) Religion

3. People who have difficulty in perceiving the impact of nonverbal messages on communication, who rely on verbal, linear, rational means of relating to reality, can be encouraged to experience how much can be perceived and exchanged without words by the following dyadic exercise.

If you get together on a pleasant spring day, you might prefer to spend the entire time without saying a word! Take a walk together through a variety of settings just looking, touching, listening, even tasting and smelling lots of varied stimuli. Walk, dance, run, crawl, sit silently together. Communicate only non-verbally. Take turns being leader on your trek; try walking

while one person's eyes are closed and the other guides him or her around; observe people and animals, interact with them. See what's available when words don't get in the way. Spend your last half hour together talking over your experience.

In each of the samples offered, and in countless others (see chapter 4), the first means for stimulating communicative growth is employed: students are asked to prolong and deepen their experience with a type of discourse that they use infrequently. This enlarges their sense of what they can do with another person.

However, even if the dialogue is very ordinary, growth can still be drawn from a dyad by expanding one's *awareness* of the process. This requires making special provision for an extended, focused period of *reflection* upon the dyadic experience.

Several options exist for structuring this period of reflection. For example, it can be done by each participant *alone* or in *discussion* with the other. The following is one brief example of a dyad, requiring instructional communication, that could arise as an everyday event:

Share with each other at length who you are and what interests you are into. Then identify something in each of your lives — an activity, a skill, a person, an interest — that one would like to learn about or experience and that the other would like to share. Each should have a turn as teacher or guide and as learner or participant. You might be sharing something about your home, your area of study, your hobby, your spiritual practice, your friend, a place you enjoy, etc. From this experience you might gain insight into how someone feels upon doing for the first time what is familiar to you, how well you can make that introduction, and what activities help the person to learn. Try to be open with each other about your perceptions.

Some examination of the process can be done before, during, and immediately after the experience. *Prior* to the dyad, participants might jot down or share orally with their partners their goals and expectations for the experience. At a point in the *middle* of the dyad, they might be instructed to review what has occurred and might yet be done to make it maximally beneficial. *After* the dyad is over, many choices exist for bringing into conscious awareness the patterns which prevailed during the time they interacted. Alone, and at their leisure, or together, during the last half hour or more of their dyad, time might be given to drawing inferences about what occurred.

The *focus* of awareness can be on a variety of communication processes. Partners might review what occurred with regard to processes that apply to all situations, processes that were specific to the kind of task they were addressing, or processes accentuated by the particular pair of people interacting. Their generalizations can apply to the kind of experience they had or, more subjectively, to themselves within it. This range of possibilities is summarized in the following chart:

Area of Focus	Process-Related Questions	Self-Related Questions
Communication	How does communication work?	How do I communicate?
Task	How does communication work re: Task X?	How do I engage in Task X?
People	How does my partner communicate?	How do I deal with this kind of partner?

There are innumerable specific questions fitting under the main headings in this chart that would help students to see connections between comments or behaviors (i.e., transactions) of which they had been unaware. Every system and theory of interpersonal relations and every kind of communication activity makes available another perspective for examining what is actually occurring. Each points to different behaviors, even to different facets of the same behavior, as being crucial in the explanation and control of what occurs.

Nevertheless, some areas in which questions might be posed to students to encourage extended reflection and (hopefully) deeper awareness of communication within any kind of dyad are suggested:

1. The first step would be to *describe* what occurred, within themselves and between them and their partners, before, during, and after the dyad. They might answer such questions as: What did you expect you would do in this session? What did you expect your partner would do? How did you expect the activity to turn out? What actually occurred? What phases or episodes were there? What were the turning points? What differences did you feel, if any, between the first half hour and the last half hour? What were your overall impressions regarding what you actually did, what your partner did, how you handled the activity? About what aspects (positive, negative, unexpected, confusing, etc.) would you like to have more awareness?
2. Using the data and questions just raised, some of the following questions might also be considered:
 - a) Expectations vs. outcomes: How did each participant see the other and the activity before the dyad began and how did this view change by the time it was over? How did what they expected affect what actually did happen?
 - b) The effect of context: To what extent did the time of day and the various factors in the setting, such as noise, light, atmosphere, etc., affect your interaction? How did events that immediately preceded and that you knew would follow the dyad affect each of you?
 - c) The influence process: How was the course of your interaction determined? How were decisions made? What unspoken norms applied that affected what you did and did not do?

- d) The affiliation process: What was the climate of your interaction? How did you make each other feel comfortable and uncomfortable? To what extent did each of you imply or state openly how you felt during your time together?
- e) The verbal and nonverbal codes: How did each use language to clarify or obfuscate your task or personal relationship? How did your props, positions, and gestures affect your interaction?
- f) The task-related strategies: How did the processes employed help or hinder the achievement of the activity undertaken? How satisfied were you with your handling of the task and to what do you attribute the results?
- g) Person-related variables: How did your roles as students in a class help or hinder your involvement in the role called for in the dyad? How did the age, sex, race, personality of each partner affect his or her interaction and how he or she was seen by the other?
- h) Interaction dynamics: In what ways did each person's behavior trigger a reciprocal response in the other (e.g., one person's openness about himself or herself caused the other to be unusually open, or one person's warmth, apathy, or argumentativeness, etc., began a sequence that built into an exchange of comments that significantly redirected the whole interaction)?
- i) Transfer or learning: How does this experience compare to similar interactions you have had previously? What have you gained from engaging in this task or interacting with this person that you will apply elsewhere, etc.?

Of course, any specific concepts introduced in text material or a lecture related to the dyadic task can be the focus of a question raised for students to explore together, in written reactions afterwards, or as members of a class discussion subsequent to each round of dyads.

To enhance students' awareness of how their interaction could be interpreted differently, from another perspective, they could be asked to exchange their written reactions to the experience with their partners. If many pairs of students in a class are performing the same activity in a dyad, their papers could be exchanged among them — thereby allowing them to see how that activity could be approached and handled differently by people with another set of dynamics operating between them.

Summary

The potential for student use of dyads to experience a variety of communication activities in an active, intimate medium leading to a heightened sense of personal power and awareness is limitless. Hopefully, this chapter has developed a clearer perspective of the range of alternatives available and the methods by which their potency as learning opportunities can be maximized.

GLOSSARY

AIKIDO (*ai*—"harmony," *ki*—"spirit" or "energy," *do*—"method" or "way"). A recently developed (1925) form of martial art that emphasizes facing situations of threat or attack from a calm, centered posture, always conscious of, but avoiding rather than retaliating, the opponent's thrust or lunge. It is learned through exercises that develop relaxation, directing one's flow of energy, and a centered, grounded stance.

BIOFEEDBACK A global term that circumscribes a variety of methods by which a person monitors the rate or state of a physical process (such as brain waves, heartbeat, muscle tension, etc.) and uses this information to learn how to gain conscious control of that process. The monitoring is usually done with a scientific instrument (such as an electroencephalograph, electrocardiograph, electromyograph) and conscious control comes from discovering what mental images or state of mind elicit change in the desired direction and then inducing those images voluntarily.

KINESICS The study of the physical movements used in everyday interpersonal interaction, more commonly known as "body language."

KOAN A question or puzzling situation posed by a teacher (or "rōshi") of Zen meditation to a student. To answer it, logical mental processes are useless. One must drop one's usual mode of thinking and see reality from a perspective in which Buddhist concepts prevail. An example is "What was your nature before you were born?" or "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

SAMADHI A state of intense, absorbed concentration that emerges from deep meditation. The mind is focused on an object and holds its attention there, to the point of dissolving any sense of distinction between the observer and the observed.

SYNECTICS A form of creative thinking which can be practiced among a group of individuals seeking to solve problems and to invent new ideas, especially in a business setting. It makes use, especially, of analogies that help people see familiar processes in new ways. For example, one asks, "If I were *process X*, what would I be doing?" "In what other situations do comparable processes exist?" etc.

TAI-CHI-CHUAN A traditional Chinese system of exercise. It incorporates a series of ritualized movements which are done slowly and with great awareness. One's body is consistently relaxed and balanced throughout. The pace is steady; the flow is smooth; one is never rigid or jerky.

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Chapter 9

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